

How does your organisation promote collaborative relationships?

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Contrary to what some believe, collaboration is not just an activity we *do*. In organisations, collaboration means a number of dimensions aligning in a productive and valuable way. Specifically, we like to talk about [three elements](#) to collaboration:

1. The nature of work
2. The relationships

3. The behaviours

When we think collaboration, we often focus on numbers 1 and 3 in this list. We consider how our work is set up to allow for collaboration (e.g., agile ways of working, [collaborative](#) frameworks). And we then think about our team's collaboration capabilities (e.g., communication or collective problem-solving skills).

But we might wonder, how is the organisation promoting collaborative relationships? What encourages people to reach across the divide and ask for help? How do we find those people who are 'connectors' and inspire more of them? These questions are equally important for creating truly collaborative organisations.

The most obvious example of activities for encouraging collaboration are team connection or cohesion events. For instance, a Friday drinks which allows people to mingle both within and outside of their teams. Surprisingly, few organisations offer other ways for people to connect across the system – to actually build these relationships which are critical to collaboration. Because of this, collaborative work languishes.

Collaboration Concentration

It is often the case that meaningful collaboration in organisations is driven by a very small percentage of employees. Research [published](#) in the HBR by Rob Cross, Reb Rebele and Adam Grant found that 3-5% of employees drive 20-35% of collaborations. And yet, sometimes these people aren't even clearly known as such by management. The authors observed that: "In fact, when we use network analysis to identify the strongest collaborators in organizations, leaders are typically surprised by at least half the names on their lists." They go on to argue that sharing the collaborative load is key.

This research illustrates further the deep importance of these types of relationships. Regardless of the way things are set up, it is certain people who consistently end up being the ‘connectors’. While this is partly due to personality, it’s also about the relationships that have been built over time. We are **more likely** to reach out to someone we’ve worked with before or otherwise know. We are also more likely to connect with people who are similar to us (the principle of **homophily**). So, how does your organisation work to build these relationships beyond these general rules? This is a matter of both principle and practice. Let’s take a look at each.

Collaborative Principles

Building more collaborative relationships is both a mindset and a practice. When it comes to the principles that underpin collaborative organisations, the people in these organisations *think* in a certain way. This brings up questions of culture and culture is set by leadership. This means role modelling and leading for the following:

1. *A genuine desire to support others* – It needs to be in the cultural DNA of the organisation to want to help. Scarcity thinking blocks relationships before they can even begin. Do we approach helping others with an open and warm mindset?
2. *Being connected is a good thing in itself* – A belief in the value of relationships is also integral. An organisation which values results and/or performance only is not going to be conducive to collaborative connections. There must be an equal importance placed on being connected as a collective.
3. *One team, not silos* – An ‘us’ vs ‘them’ mentality across departments or other divisions creates significant barriers to collaboration. Requests for support or joint problem solving will fall on deaf ears or they will find themselves facing obstacle after obstacle.

By modelling these cultural dimensions, you can set the foundation for open and connective ways of working.

Collaborative Practices

Next, we can turn to practices for a more collaborative culture. Supporting and growing these mindsets and these relationships means implementing some of the following:

1. A Day in the Life

Day-in-the-life experiences are crucial for understanding different parts of the business. Beyond developing an intellectual grasp of how other roles work, they see us empathise with and build relationships with others. These “weak ties” can then become powerful nodes for collaboration.

2. Cross-Team Hack-a-Thons or Retros

Opportunities for coming together and working on problems and improvements are one of the most impactful places for building connection. Often in these situations people will volunteer for collaborative activities simply because the forum makes it easy. They will also build that muscle for working together and get to know each other more deeply.

3. Creating a ‘gift culture’ of mentoring and coaching

Mentoring and coaching should be a given in your organisation. Rather than seen as an ‘extra’ that leaders have to do, they should be the lifeblood of building the next generation of leaders. This can be set up with formal (an explicit mentoring program which pairs senior leaders with emerging leaders) and informal (encouraging leaders to mentor others as part of their development and growth) mechanisms and allows people to collaborate vertically as well as horizontally.

4. Set Stakeholder KPIs

Setting collaborative KPIs is the most formal approach one can take towards relationship-building. This can demonstrate that your organisation really considers this kind of work to be important. Consider how this is represented in their performance measures, for those members of teams where influencing and connecting is particularly critical,

If you want to foster a more innovative organisation, you need a more collaborative one. This means focusing not just on work systems and skills but also on creating the space to build meaningful relationships.

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